The Persistent Humanity of Samuel Bachrach

By Michael True, Ph.D.

What makes a community work? How does Worcester maintain its vitality, while other cities of equal promise fall victim to urban blight?

Possible answers to such questions include this one: that a community retains its vitality by being responsive to the needs and interests of its residents. Among the people who have kept Worcester alert and responsive in recent years is Dr. Samuel Bachrach, who died on November 27, after forty years' residence in the city. He made the community "work."

In a eulogy at the time of his death and at various award ceremonies earlier, Dr. Bachrach's contributions to area cultural and humanitarian organizations were recognized and reviewed. My purpose here is not to list them again, but to reflect upon their significance and to wonder a bit at his genius for enriching the common good — accomplished in the midst of a remarkable medical career and an eventful family life.

Born in New York City in 1911, Sam Bachrach grew up in Maynard, Massachusetts. After graduating from high school there and later from the University of Maine and Tufts University Medical School, he came to Worcester initially as an intern, at Memorial Hospital. Following service during World War Two with the Army Medical Corps, in England and Belgium, he and his wife, Lilyan, made their home in Worcester, where their four children were born and reared.

Over the next four decades, Sam Bachrach was associated with countless local groups committed to the general welfare, several of which he helped to initiate. Among them are the Age Center, Human Rights Committee, Worcester Forum for the Study of Values, and Worcester County Poetry Association. Sam's love of poetry had led him, years ago, to the Golier Bookshop, at Harvard Square. Its owner, Gordon Cairnie, often spoke of "the library man from Worcester," since Sam had chaired the Board of the Worcester Public Library.

He had the idea of publishing poetry broadsides, for distribution in the schools; so in 1971, with a donation from Sam and Lilyan Bachrach, the help of several teachers and the cooperation of the Worcester Public Library, the Worcester County Poetry Association began its ambitious program. Stanley Kunitz, Denise Levertov, and Robert Bly, initiated the series readings and wrote original statements on poetics for the handsome broadsides, designed by Ann McCrea. Since then, the city has become a poetry center, with important prizes, including the Academy of American Poets' Walt Whitman Award, the Grolier Prize, and grants from the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities, being awarded to Worcester poets. These prizes, as well as grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New England Council on the Arts, might never have come to Worcester without the inspiration and guidance of Sam Bachrach.

Many people tell similar stories about Sam's associations, with the *Worcester Medical News,* which he edited; the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, whose annual award he received in 1983; the Jewish Community Center, the Lincoln Group of Boston, and the World Federalists.

Sam loved books, not only for the ideas in them, but also for the art of making them. His habit was to read several newspapers a day, beginning with the Worcester *Telegram,* Boston *Globe,* and New York *Times,* then the *Christian Science Monitor* and the *Wall Street Journal.* Definite about his own opinions and attitudes, he nonetheless enjoyed the friendship of many people with whom he disagreed, sometimes vigorously.

Two of his sayings were (1) "Never give up on your kids;" and (2) "No one is all bad." Such statements sound rather bald, out of context, but in times of frustration, they are wise counsel to an anxious father or a frustrated voter, respectively. As aphorisms, they reflect the civility and decency of the man.

Nothing suggests the special quality of Sam Bachrach better than our last conversation, within a few hours of his death. Although the fall months had been troublesome for him, with trips back and forth to the hospital, he was as alert and attentive to events as ever, with newspapers, newsletters, magazines, and clippings, including a Herblock cartoon on the recent presidential campaign, piled near his bedside. In the late afternoon, he asked me to read to him: reviews of recent poetry collections by Joseph Brodsky and Louis Simpson, from the *New York Times Book Review;* and a meditation on the prophet Isaiah, from a recent collection by Daniel Berrigan (but only after Sam had taken the book in his hands, checked the binding and the print, and given it his approval). Talk about Father Berrigan led to reminiscences about Sam's being with Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama, in 1965, and — as a representative of the Physicians for Human Rights — treating people injured on that march. (Tapes of these reminiscences, made at the time, reside in the Worcester Public Library collection.)

A century ago, someone once described the Victorian essayist, John Henry Newman, as a person "whose interests were world-wide," who spoke "about subjects of the day, of literature, of public persons and incidents, of everything which was generally interesting." Such were the concerns, also, of Sam Bachrach, in his book reviews, his editorials, his letters to the editor, his conversation. Or as one of his favorite poets, Karl Shapiro, said of another libertarian, Sam Bachrach was a man "whose thought was shapely and whose dream was broad." Through all his life ran a current of persistent humanity.

In its social and literary history, Worcester as a rich tradition of people who lived their lives in ways that benefitted the community. Among them, Dr. Samuel Bachrach deserves a special place, not only for his lifetime achievements, but also because of the example he leaves for anyone who wishes to make this city a better place to live.

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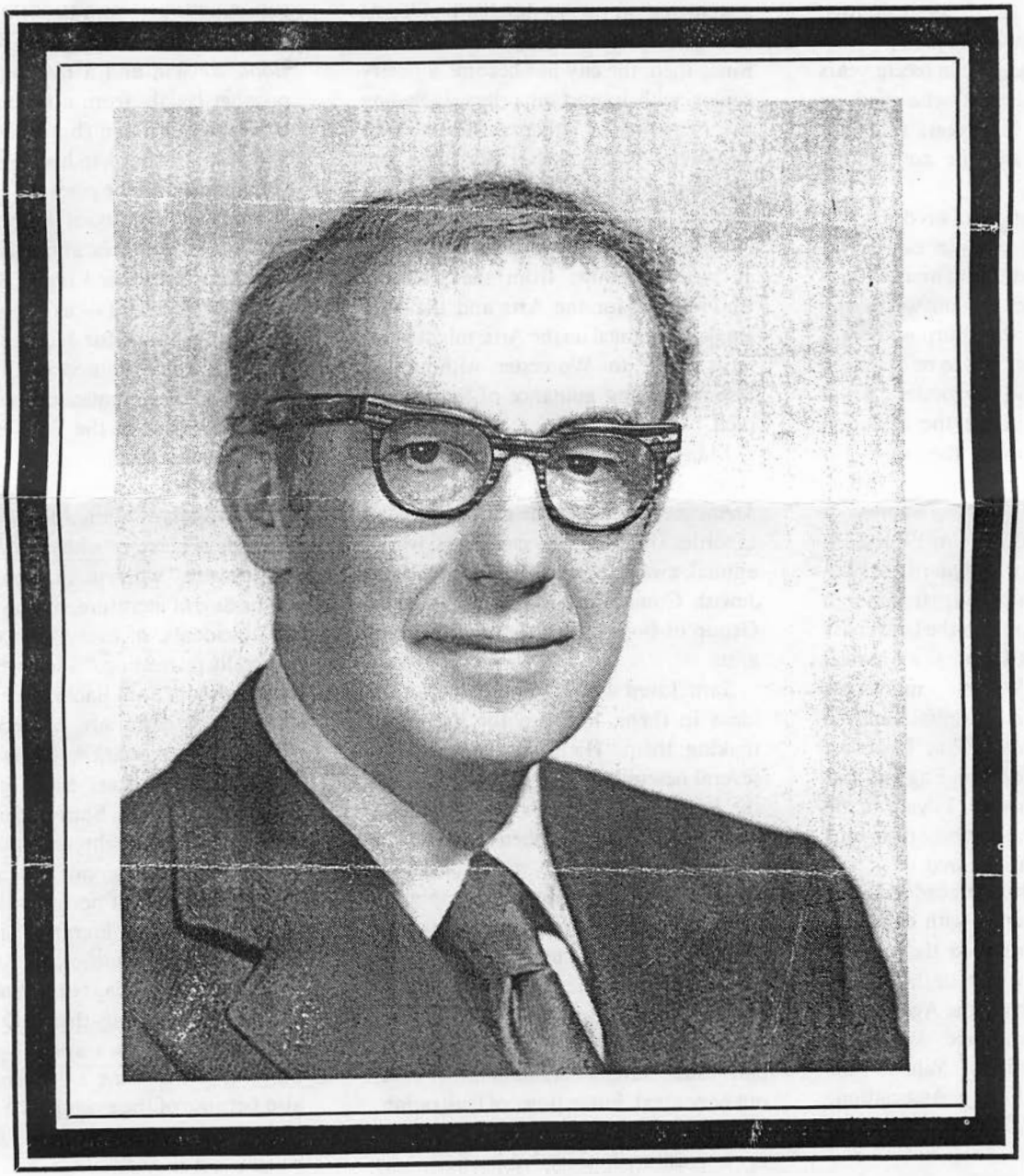
WORCESTER
MEDICAL NEWS

Non-Profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Worcester, MA
Permit No. 467

Published by the Worcester District Medical Society Volume 54/Number 1/February, 1989



SAMUEL BACHRACH, M.D.

Editor, Worcester Medical News, 1973-1981